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Museum plan carves Hyde Park divide

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On hot Texas nights, sculptor Elisabet Ney slept on the roof of her Hyde Park studio or in a tent outside.

The land was wilder then, with prairie grasses, cedar saplings and a chicken wire fence. It reflected Ney's belief that the natural world shouldn't be overly embellished.

Today, mature trees shade the land and a long stone wall greets visitors to Ney's studio, a City of Austin museum. A plan by the parks department calls for removing the wall and 68 trees and shrubs to return the property to the way it looked when Ney worked there, from 1892 to 1907, carving the great men of Texas and Europe.

But some residents object to the restoration plan and want the city to halt the first phase of work, which began last week. They argue that the wall and trees added since Ney's death also have historical value and should stay.

The case, which has split Hyde Park neighbors, raises a broader question about restoration: return a place to its earliest appearance or save a patchwork of historical features added over time?

"The wall and landscaping are historic landmarks, too," said Hyde Park resident Lorre Weidlich. "You shouldn't destroy one landmark to restore another."

Sculpting her surroundings

Ney was running a cotton plantation outside of Houston in the 1890s when Texas Gov. Oran Roberts asked Ney to come to Austin and resume sculpting. The German-born Ney was the first female graduate of the Berlin Academy of Sculpture. Ney was internationally known, and Roberts wanted her to create public art - which Texas lacked - for spaces like the state Capitol, said Colin Haymes, an assistant at the Ney museum.

Ney built a Roman Gothic studio, carved classical forms of historic figures such as Otto von Bismarck, Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin (the latter two stand at the doors to the Capitol Rotunda) and owned fine linens and china. She kept the land outside her door rough and unfettered, however, and often slept under the stars. Defying convention, she cut her hair short, wore bloomers and refused to ride horses sidesaddle. Her terrace became a gathering place for Austin's intelligentsia, and she and her friends pushed local movers and shakers to create a fine arts program at the University of Texas and commission art for public spaces, Haymes said.

Ney believed that natural, authentic environs would lead to authentic art and life, said Patricia O'Donnell, principal of Heritage Landscapes, a Vermont-based firm that wrote the restoration plan and researched Ney's writings and photos. Ney's landscape choices mirrored that philosophy, O'Donnell said. She picked land beside **Waller Creek**, used Texas limestone and planted native trees like post oak and Ashe juniper, commonly known as cedar.

After Ney died in 1907, a fine arts group added stone paths, trees, the stone wall and other flourishes, Haymes said.

In 2006, the City of Austin hired Heritage Landscapes and an Austin firm for a total of \$160,000 to write the restoration plan for the museum and grounds. The 624 -page plan was approved by state and federal preservation agencies last year.

If the plan is fully carried out, which would take years and cost about \$5 million, the site would look as it did in Ney's time, with a vegetable garden, a stable and other features not present today.

But the parks department has only \$750,000 for an initial round of work - \$250,000 from a federal Save America's Treasures grant and \$500,000 from a 2006 bond package. It plans to waterproof the flood-prone studio basement, rebuild the stone terrace where Ney entertained and build a wheelchair-accessible path that partly re-creates Ney's carriage path. Neighbors are fine with those changes.

But some oppose plans to fell mature Ashe junipers and crape myrtles and, in the long run, replace the roughly 240-foot stone wall, built in the 1930s, with a chicken wire fence. They say the city snuck these ideas into the plan without adequate public input, and they want the money spent on other repairs, such as replacing the studio's weak roof.

Robin Camp, a Public Works project manager overseeing the restoration, said the available money isn't enough to replace the roof, so the city must tackle smaller projects first. The city held 15 public meetings before and after the plan was finished, and overhauling it could jeopardize the federal grant, she said.

Of the 52 trees to be felled - out of more than 200 - the biggest one is dead, some are invasive species and two lean over and have damaged the roof, she said. About 38 new trees and shrubs would be planted on the site. At neighbors' urging, Camp recently halted some of the tree removal work to ask the Texas Historical Commission to review the plans again. The commission said Friday that two cedars, a live oak and a mountain laurel that were slated for removal could stay, but the 29 crape myrtles don't fit the period of historical significance.

Hyde Park resident John Paul Moore, who has researched Ney, said it is likely that she planted some of the cedars tagged for removal and that Frank T. Ramsey, a close friend of Ney's who owned a successful nursery, probably planted the crape myrtles.

The stone wall that runs along 44th Street was a gift from the Violet Crown Garden Club, a group founded by Clara Driscoll, who came from a prominent South Texas ranching family and used her money to save the Alamo from demolition, Moore said. And the wall is marked with 1939, the year of Austin's centennial as the state capital, he said.

The first phase of restoration only includes adding the wire fence to the lot's eastern edge, but the long-term plan is to encircle most of the 2.5-acre lot.

"There were things of value added in Ney's honor after she died. To take them out just because she wasn't alive when they were put in doesn't make sense," Moore said.

Hyde Park resident Ann Graham said de-cluttering the landscape would set off Ney's "glorious" studio, which is topped with a quirky castle tower. And a restoration should, first and foremost, honor Ney's vision, Graham said.

"The building and grounds are historic landmarks because of Elisabet Ney and who she was," Graham said.

Freezing time

As part of the federal grant, the Texas Historical Commission has an easement on Ney's land and would have to review and OK any changes the city proposes to the restoration plan.

Mark Wolfe, the commission's executive director, said it is unusual for landscapes to be fully restored because often there isn't enough documentation of outdoor spaces.

Ney's case is different because several photos and writings show how she kept the grounds, he said. "It makes sense to restore the entire property to that period," he said. "That doesn't mean another alternative wouldn't be appropriate." However, the commission would discourage mixing features from different eras, he said, because the plan calls for a more literal restoration back to Ney's time.

But Hyde Park resident Maria-Elena Cigarroa notes that the historical picture will fade as newly planted trees grow tall and the chicken wire fence succumbs to rust and rot. "You can't freeze a landscape in time," she said.

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(GRAPHIC)

Long-term plan for restoration of museum grounds (see microfilm)

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